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## Wood Furniture: The Care It Deserves

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# Wood Furniture:

Prepared by Jacquelyn K. Sanneman



# The Care It Deserves

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Today there is a renewed or increased emphasis on buying high-quality wood furniture. This trend makes it important for consumers to understand how to take care of wood furniture. Proper care can add years of service to your furniture and enhance its appearance. Inappropriate care or the use of the wrong furniture care products may cause an unattractive appearance or could actually harm the wood's finish.

## The Basics

There are four basic procedures in a furniture care routine.

### Dust

Dust often with a soft cloth and always work with the grain of the wood. A thick coat of dust may damage the furniture finish as the dust is removed. Use a dustcloth with natural fibers such as an old undershirt. Cheesecloths or unwashed materials usually contain sizing which may scratch the finish.

Dusting sprays are designed to be applied directly to your dusting cloth and should never be sprayed on the furniture surface. Slightly dampening your dustcloth with water also helps your cloth attract and hold dust.

### Touch-Up

Wipe up spills as quickly as possible. Spots and stains allowed to remain on the wood become difficult if not impossible to remove. Blemishes and scratches should also be periodically repaired. (See section on "Minor Furniture Touch-ups.")

### Polish

Polish furniture occasionally with products recommended for your furniture finish. **Do not polish more than three or four times a year** unless it is a much used surface. Excessive use of polishes and oils will cause a cloudy film to build up which masks the beauty of the

wood. Wiping off the polish before it dries will reduce the amount of film left on the surface.

**Do not mix types of polish.** Oil causes wax to become gummy. Clean the furniture surface thoroughly before changing furniture care products.

**Avoid using polishes containing silicones** on good-quality wood furniture. Most aerosol-type polishes contain silicone, an ingredient that gives a long-lasting high gloss to furniture. Silicones eventually work their way into the finish and dry out the wood, making it difficult to repair or refinish the surface.

### Clean

Clean your furniture as needed. Furniture needs to be cleaned if there is a film of polish or dust and grime which has accumulated over the years. Many older pieces may only need a thorough cleaning instead of refinishing. It is also important to clean your furniture if you are changing types of polish.

## Choosing Care Products

Today's furniture finishes are made to withstand wear with a minimum of care. Too frequent use of polishes can actually be harmful to the finish. Therefore, it is important to select good-quality furniture care products and use them according to recommended methods.

When choosing furniture care products, you should match the product to the furniture finish. The type of finish will determine the treatment required for cleaning and repairing. Check with your dealer for specific information on care when you are purchasing new wood furniture.

## How to Identify Type of Finish

If you already own a piece of furniture and do not know what type of finish it has, it is possible to identify the finish. To identify a clear,

hard finish, moisten a small inconspicuous spot with denatured alcohol; if the spot softens, the finish is shellac. If the finish is not affected by denatured alcohol, test another inconspicuous spot with lacquer thinner. If the spot under the thinner softens, the finish is lacquer. If neither solvent softens the finish, the finish is varnish. (**Caution:** Be sure to test on small areas which are not noticeable such as the back of the leg, because you will be removing the finish in these areas.)

To determine whether the finish is oil, a penetrating type of finish, or one of the clear, hard finishes just mentioned, apply a small amount of oil to the wood. The oil will penetrate a soft oil finish. If the oil becomes sticky and remains on the surface, the finish is one of the hard surface finishes mentioned earlier.

### Lacquer

Lacquer is used on practically all good-quality commercially finished furniture and on furniture with special clear or colored finishes. Lacquered finishes have a high gloss which is crystal hard and chips. It is important to avoid water when cleaning or caring for lacquered furniture because the wood base may swell and cause the lacquer to crack or bubble.

To clean a lacquered finish, use a solvent-based furniture cleaner or a household spot remover. Apply the solvent or cleaner with one hand and wipe promptly with the other. Work only a small section at a time.

To protect lacquered furniture, use a liquid wax or cream polish that gives a high gloss. Paste wax may be used on heavily used surfaces.

### Oil Finishes

Oil finishes are found on most old furniture and better quality contemporary furniture, especially Scandinavian pieces.

To clean oiled wood, use a solution of 1 cup boiled linseed oil, 1 cup turpentine, and 1/3 cup white vinegar. Wipe the surface with a soft cloth that has been dipped in the cleaning solution. Never pour the solution directly onto the wood. Let the solution stand for a few minutes to loosen the soil; then wipe off the excess. To finish, rub with the grain.

**Do not use** wax or furniture polish on an oil finish.

Re-oil yearly with boiled linseed oil or a product recommended by the manufacturer. Avoid using an oil dressing too often or too liberally

as it will cause a hardened oil build-up. If this happens, use mineral spirits (paint thinner) to dissolve the residue.

### Varnish or Shellac

Either finish can be cleaned with mineral spirits (paint thinner) or a mixture of 1 part turpentine to 3 parts linseed oil. Moisten a cloth with cleaner and rub briskly on the wood surface. If a lot of dirt and oil have accumulated, it may be necessary to repeat this several times. Change to a clean cloth frequently.

Protect a shellac or varnish finish with a liquid wax or cream polish that will give the amount of gloss you prefer. Paste wax is appropriate for heavily used surfaces.

### Painted Surfaces

Paint is used mainly on French Provincial furniture and accessory pieces.

To clean painted furniture, wash with a solution of mild, non-abrasive detergent and warm water. Wring a cloth nearly dry and work on a small section at a time, then rinse with clear water. Dry the surface quickly before continuing.

Use any wax or polish recommended for painted surfaces to achieve the desired amount of gloss. **Do not** use linseed oil on painted furniture because it will darken the paint color.

### Reminders

Taking care of furniture also involves day-to-day considerations.

- **Avoid** exposing furniture to excessive heat, cold, dampness, or direct sunlight. These conditions will effect the color of the wood and may cause checking or cracking of the finish.
- **Do not** place plastic or rubber items directly on natural-finished wood surfaces. Some rubber and plastics contain ingredients which may cause the finish to soften or become yellow. These discolorations are difficult and often impossible to remove.
- **Always** use protective mats on dining tables that do not have heat-resistant finishes. Provide coasters for cold drinks to prevent rings caused by moist glasses on any wood surface.
- **Avoid** sliding items across the furniture surface. Glue felt pads or other protective coverings on the bottom of accessories.

### Minor Furniture Touch-Ups

Minor scratches and blemishes may be treated at home to restore the wood's original ap-

pearance. The sooner these damages are repaired the easier it is to get good results. Spots and stains allowed to remain on the wood become difficult if not impossible to remove. Severe damage, which has penetrated the finish, usually requires partial or complete refinishing. Do not attempt to repair badly damaged surfaces without the use of proper materials or professional help.

A well-waxed or polished surface is your best safeguard against many of these minor damages occurring. Once you have restored the wood's appearance, re-wax or polish carefully to protect from further damage.

### **Alcohol Stains**

Alcohol stains are caused by spilled drinks and by many medicines, lotions, and perfumes. Since alcohol dissolves many finishes, it is important to react quickly. Wipe up the spill quickly and rub the spot vigorously with your palm or with a cloth dipped in a small amount of furniture polish.

For older stains use a paste of rottenstone, baking soda, or cigarette ashes mixed with mineral oil or linseed oil. Rub lightly in the direction of the grain. Then wipe with plain linseed oil. Rub briskly with the grain of the wood, using a clean soft cloth. Wipe frequently to compare and match gloss of the repaired area with the original finish.

### **Burns**

Light cigarette burns which have not penetrated the finish may be removed with a thin paste of rottenstone, soda, or cigarette ashes mixed with mineral oil or linseed oil. Rub lightly in the direction of the grain. Wipe with plain linseed oil. Repeat as necessary, then polish. If the burn is too deep to be restored by this method, consult a professional.

### **Candle Wax**

Scrape away as much wax as you can using your finger or a stiff piece of cardboard. Applying ice cubes in a plastic bag to the wax may help it to crumble. Remove remaining traces of wax with a cloth moistened with mineral spirits (paint thinner) or cleaning fluid. Re-polish entire surface area.

### **Dark Spots**

Rings and discolorations caused by some plastic or rubber items react with the finish and cannot be removed without refinishing. Dark spots and discolorations that have not penetrat-

ed the finish may be removed with a rottenstone and oil paste. See "Burns" for more information.

### **Dents**

Before repairing the dent, remove the finish from the area. Place a dampened blotter or heavy fabric over the dent. The moisture should cause the wood to swell and restore the surface. It may be necessary to repeat this process several times. If moisture alone will not restore the dent, carefully apply the tip of a warm iron to the dampened blotter. The steam will cause the wood to swell. Refinish the area to match the original finish.

### **Ink**

Quickly blot up ink spills. Press the cloth down firmly. Change to a clean area and repeat blotting as necessary. Do not rub the ink in. Ink stains that have penetrated the wood usually require professional treatment; however, you might try the treatment for minor burns.

### **Nail Polish**

Nail polish might be removed by rubbing with 0000 steel wool and paste wax or oil. Never use nail polish remover on furniture finishes as it will soften and dissolve the finish. If the nail polish damages the finish, partial refinishing may be necessary.

### **Paint Spots**

Fresh paint can be wiped off with a cloth dipped in liquid wax or oil. Soften dried paint by soaking with boiled linseed oil. Let it remain on the surface for a while, and then gently scrape away paint with a fingernail or stiff cardboard. Remove remaining traces of paint with a paste of rottenstone and linseed oil according to the information for the treatment of minor burns.

### **Scratches**

Light scratches will often disappear when carefully rubbed with furniture polish or oil. Deeper scratches can be hidden by carefully rubbing with a piece of oily nutmeat such as walnut or pecan. Be careful to rub the nutmeat directly into the scratch so it will not darken the surrounding wood. Old-fashioned tincture of iodine works well to restore the color in mahogany. Commercial scratch removers or stick wax to match the wood finish can also be used. After the scratch has been hidden, polish or wax the entire area.

## White Water Spots or Rings

White water spots or rings on a well-waxed surface may be removed by rubbing a small amount of furniture polish on the area. More stubborn spots may be removed by rubbing lightly with a damp cloth with a few drops of ammonia on it. If not, follow the directions for older alcohol stains. Once the blemish has been restored, polish the entire surface.

For more information on furniture care and restoration or professional assistance, contact your local furniture dealer, professional refinisher, paint and hardware stores or county Extension office.



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